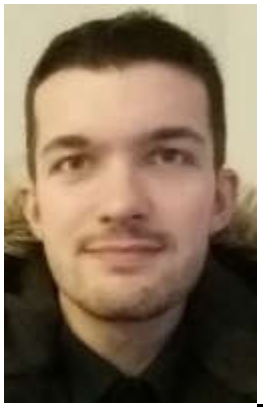
Anglo-Irish relations in mid-nineteenth-century Preston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Newcastle University lecturer **Jack Hepworth** has contributed the following article. It builds on the dissertation that he wrote for his BA degree at Durham University. Jack graduated with a first in history and was awarded a Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship for Academic Excellence in 2014-2015 and the Gibson Prize for History in 2015. Jack was born and brought up in Preston and South Ribble. He recalls, 'A happy summer spent in the Lancashire Archives (LRO as it was then) in 2014 underpinned the research for this project.'

Preston's credentials as a town transformed by the industrial revolution are well-established. In the fifty years following 1811, Preston's population multiplied fivefold. Just thirty miles from Manchester's preeminent 'cottonopolis', by 1851 some 29.5 percent of Preston's population worked in the cotton industry. [1] At this juncture, one-quarter of Irish migrants in Britain lived in Lancashire. [2] The political, religious, and social dynamics of migrant experience across Victorian Britain have been the subject of much sterling scholarship. [3] Residential segregation and ethnic and/or sectarian tensions have been a recurring hallmark in many studies. For example, in their detailed accounts of mid-nineteenth-century Liverpool, Phillip Waller and Frank Neal charted persistent Anglo-Irish rioting and violence. [4] How did the Irish and local residents in Preston experience this period of momentous social upheaval?

A combination of local factors informed the complexity of Anglo-Irish encounters in Preston. First, as Peter Smith's recent work (https://prestonhistory.com/subjects/irish-ghettoes-in-19th-century-preston/) on this site has demonstrated, [5] Irish 'ghettoes' were relatively scarce in Preston. With the notable exception of slum dwellings north of Friargate, and around Marsh Lane – an area which now hosts part of the University of Central Lancashire campus – the Irish were distributed fairly widely around the town, Frenchwood excepted. The low level of residential segregation in Preston diverged from the experience of major cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, and Glasgow, but had much in common with comparable medium-sized towns like Gateshead and Merthyr Tydfil. [6]

See also: Irish not welcome in 1830s Preston (https://prestonhistory.com/sources-2/irish-not-welcome-in-1830s-preston/)

In Preston, cooperation between the Irish and English working classes considerably undercut the degree of tension between the communities. Migrants and their hosts found common cause in the popular movements of the period: trade unions, Chartism, and friendly societies. A seventeen-year-old Irish cotton stripper named Bernard McNamara became the town's most prominent 'martyr' during the Plug Plot riots of 1842. McNamara was employed at Oxendale's mill when he was shot dead by the militia. Irish trade unionists such as Michael Gallagher and Daniel O'Neil played key role in local labour politics: Gallagher led the Operative Spinners and Minders Committee during the noted strike of 1853 and 1854. A militant who urged his comrades to reject compromise with the cotton lord Thomas Miller, Gallagher won the support of cotton workers who backed him as their representative. Reflecting in March 1854 on the operatives' protests against the ten percent wage cut, Gallagher lauded unity transcending nationality. According to the operatives' leader, the strike had seen Irish and English in the town 'united together by the common bond of fraternal charity'. [7]

Additionally, Irish arrivals were barely even a majority of the town's migrants. Preston's economic growth and labour market generated a centripetal force, attracting workers from Lancashire's rural surroundings and wider region. In 1851, over 40 percent of the town's inhabitants were migrants from within a ten-mile radius. Only approximately 30 percent came from more than thirty miles away. [8] The Irish were not a singular 'foreign' community in the town.

Preston's peculiar confessional demographics – as 'the most Catholic town in England' [9] – also enabled the Catholic majority among Irish migrants to engage in the church's pastoral, spiritual, and civic commitments. However, Preston's exceptionalism should not be overstated: the town was not entirely insulated from nationwide moments of heightened sectarian and ethnic tensions. As Donald MacRaild found in his study of the Irish in Victorian Cumbria, [10] at moments of crisis in Anglo-Irish politics, especially concerning the Catholic Church's aggressive policy in Europe, sectarianism gained traction. When the Catholic hierarchy in England was re-established in 1850, twenty-two Preston clergy wrote to the *Preston Guardian* denouncing the papacy. [11] Just two years later, the local Tory candidate, Robert Townley Parker, ran an election campaign which employed anti-popery rhetoric. [12]

Class identities in the industrialising north did not entirely subsume ethnic distinctions. Mutual suspicions and antagonisms occasionally resulted in violent exchanges, usually fuelled by alcohol. For instance, the Farington pub brawl among workers constructing the Northern Union railway line in May 1838 was fought along lines of nationality. The violence continued over two days, during which an Irish labourer shot dead a local man. The sheer quantity of men who mobilised quickly to join the mob is striking: the Preston railway constable Joseph Thornber was convinced that he had seen over 700 English youths gathering in their attempts to avenge the death.

Some degree of underlying tension existed between sections of the English and Irish communities in Preston, though major incidents of inter-communal violence erupted only at moments of major economic and political upheaval. Aside from the Farington Riot, episodes of violence between English and Irish tended to be extremely small-scale and 'personal', rather than gang-based or organised. The Irishman Andrew Gilligan, for example, charged with assault in November 1852 for his role in a pub brawl with John Taylor, a local carter, cited Taylor's 'taunting him on his Irish birth' in mitigation for his violence. [13] Nobody else was involved in the skirmish. It is unclear, too, to what extent Taylor's jibes were intended to be directly offensive; the contextual involvement of alcohol may well have played a part in turning a misunderstood exchange of raillery into what might initially appear to posterity to have been a more

serious incident. Similarly, the fight that broke out between Owen Wear and Henry Wilson in March 1854, in which Wilson threatened to 'punch all the Irish buggers in the street', stemmed from Wilson's blundering involvement in a domestic row between Wear and his wife. [14]

Forces external to Preston were foremost in stirring inter-communal tensions. In the late 1860s, William Murphy, an agent of the Protestant Electoral Union, toured the north-west and midlands, delivering demagogic invective in packed lecture halls. Murphy's habitual refrain invoked the threat of Fenianism and the 'evils of popery' in a language which combined hostility to Catholicism with attacks upon supposedly separatist Irish migrants. Murphy's visits triggered riots in Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham in 1868. While it is unknown whether he visited Preston, he certainly toured Lancashire at some length, and unrest in June 1868 bore the imprint of his influence.

At a time of nationwide tension amid popular fears of a renewed Fenian bombing campaign, rumours abounded of conspiracy in towns throughout the north-west, Preston included. The riots in the town began when an Anglican procession paraded through one of the few recognised 'Irish districts' around Moor Lane and Adelphi Street during Whitsuntide festivities. A mass brawl ensued, with hundreds of English and Irish fighting a pitched battle in the streets. Mayor Miles Myres banned large gatherings in a bid to quell the disorder.

Perhaps the most prevalent English outlook towards the Irish was not so much overt intolerance as a more paternalistic sense of pity. In the mid-nineteenth century, the local Whig press frequently held up Ireland's economic impoverishment as a cautionary tale warning against the dangers of fading entrepreneurship; far from being hated and ostracised out of hand, the Irish were to be pitied for the plight of their homeland. The *Preston Chronicle* in March 1854 warned that the ongoing lock-out and strike posed a threat to the town's industrial future and risked reducing England to the status of Ireland, home to 'the most pauperised and degraded population in the empire'. [15] The temperance leader Joseph Livesey, meanwhile, commented that the dangerous prospects of economic downturn could be observed with one single 'glance at these Irish labourers'. [16]

During the Irish potato famine, Anglican and nonconformist churches in the town joined in raising significant sums of money for the relief fund: in one week alone in February 1847, the nonconformist chapel on Cannon Street raised almost £50 for the cause. [17] The fact that such a sum was contributed by members of the Cannon Street congregation is especially significant, since the chapel was located in an area not noted for the prevalence of Irish migrants. Since the Irish presence in the congregation itself was negligible, it is striking that much of this money must have been contributed by local dissenters who lived in close proximity to members of the Preston Irish community.

Even at the height of the strike, when cotton lords attempted to 'import' Irish blackleg labour, the Preston Guardian editorialised with sympathy for the Irish in an article headed 'Shameful Treatment of Immigrants', expressing outrage against the ill-treatment of three Irish labourers who were left stranded at Manchester's Victoria Station, awaiting a transfer to Preston. [18] Whilst Livesey expressed regret at the economic pressures created by mass immigration, he defended on principle the right of the Irish to settle in England: 'The Irishman has as much right to come to England as the Lancashire man has to go to Yorkshire'. [19]

Although the town's Protestant hierarchy on occasion attempted to foment sectarian tensions – as far back as 1837, one Preston vicar had written with outrage against 'the Papists [who] are about to build a school not far off… we must be enabled to counteract them' [20] – Prestonians did not simply acquiesce in such divisive politics. In 1844, when the hard-line Protestant vicar Owen Parr attempted to besmirch the names of the town's Catholics and Irish in his campaign to uphold the ban placed upon Catholic worship in the workhouse, correspondents to the Preston Guardian denounced Parr's tactics: 'A Lover of Christianity' was 'sorry to see such bigotry and narrow-minded sectarian spirit' whilst another letter criticised Parr's 'religious bigotry and intolerance'. [21]

The Irish in Preston were not defined exclusively by ‘otherness’ or social marginalisation. Their participation in labour politics, Catholic Church institutions and leadership, and variegated social roles command attention. The causality of occasional violent eruptions must be situated in broader contexts, considering wider political and economic tensions and the influence of external agitators. Although an undercurrent of mutual suspicion persisted between the town’s Irish population and its host community, antagonism was only one part of multifaceted Anglo-Irish interactions in mid-nineteenth-century Preston.

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[1] J. K. Walton, *Lancashire: a social history, 1558-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 111, 252; R. J. Morris & R. Rodger, ‘An introduction to British urban history, 1820-1914’, in R. J. Morris & R. Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian city: a reader in British urban history, 1820-1914* (London: Longman, 1993), pp. 2, 4.
[2] J. G. Williamson, ‘The impact of the Irish on British labour markets during the industrial revolution’, in Roger Swift & Sheridan Gilley (eds.), *The Irish in Britain, 1815-1939* (Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1989), p. 140.
[3] A comprehensive bibliography would be too extensive to include. For a masterful historiographical review, see Roger Swift, ‘Identifying the Irish in Victorian Britain: recent trends in historiography’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 27 (2009), pp. 134-151. Since Swift’s comprehensive overview, Donald MacRaild, Kyle Hughes, and John Herson have been foremost among several scholars complexifying this rich and diverse literature. See, for example, Donald M. MacRaild, *The Irish diaspora in Britain, 1750-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); John Herson, *Divergent paths: family histories of Irish emigrants in Britain, 1820-1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); Kyle Hughes & Donald MacRaild, *Ribbon societies in nineteenth-century Ireland and its diaspora: the persistence of tradition* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018); Donald MacRaild, Tanja Bueltmann & J. C. D. Clark (eds.), *British and Irish diasporas: societies, cultures, ideologies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).
[4] P. J. Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism: a political and social history of Liverpool, 1868-1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1981); Frank Neal, *Sectarian violence: the Liverpool experience, 1819-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
[5] Peter Smith, ‘Irish “ghettoes” in 19th-century Preston’. Available at https://prestonhistory.com/subjects/irish-ghettoes-in-19th-century-preston/ (https://prestonhistory.com/subjects/irish-ghettoes-in-19th-century-preston/) (accessed 29 July 2020).
[6] Frank Neal, ‘A statistical profile of the Irish community in Gateshead’, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 27 (2009), pp. 50-81; Joan Allen, *Joseph Cowen and popular radicalism on Tyneside, 1829-1900* (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2007), pp. 79-80; John Herson, *Divergent paths: family histories of Irish emigrants in Britain, 1820-1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 69, 310.
[7] *Preston Guardian*, 4 March 1854.
[8] Graham Davis, ‘Little Irelands’, in Roger Swift & Sheridan Gilley (eds.), *The Irish in Britain, 1815-1939* (Savage, Maryland: Barnes & Noble, 1989), p. 107.
[9] Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in every town: the provincial press in England, 1855-1900* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), p. 31.
[10] Donald M. MacRaild, *Culture, conflict and migration: the Irish in Victorian Cumbria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), p. 15.

[11] *Preston Guardian*, 16 November 1850.
[12] D. G. Paz, *Popular anti-Catholicism in mid-Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 203.
[13] *Preston Guardian*, 4 December 1852.
[14] *Preston Guardian*, 18 March 1854.
[15] *Preston Chronicle*, 4 March 1854.
[16] Livesey Collection, University of Central Lancashire: *The Struggle*, Nos. 53, 94.
[17] *Preston Chronicle*, 13 February 1847.
[18] *Preston Guardian*, 8 April 1854.
[19] Livesey Collection, University of Central Lancashire: *The Struggle*, No. 137.
[20] Lancashire Archives, Preston: DDX 2422/acc10214/160.
[21] *Preston Guardian*, 23 November 1844; *Preston Guardian*, 7 December 1844.

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